Deconstructing commemorative narratives: The anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall

Historically, researchers have studied commemorative events primarily for their political role in the (re)construction of contested national collective memories and identities, but globalisation, social justice movements, multiculturalism and regionalism forces are further transforming commemorative practices in the 21st century. This study adopts the semiotic paradigm to deconstruct commemorative narratives communicated during major anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In doing so, this paper evidences how interwoven signs in these commemorative events construct multi-layered narratives of transnational collective memory and identity based on shared values that transcend the political boundaries of the nation. The study further showcases how shifting political contexts influence commemorative narratives, whilst at the same time commemorative events may increasingly be designed to appeal to a broader, global audience as leisure phenomena of transnational significance.

Keywords: Commemorative events; commemorative narratives; memory; identity; semiotics; Berlin Wall

Word count: 8,949

Introduction

Commemorative practices are those devices through which a collective 'recalls, marks, embodies, discusses or argues about its past' (Turner, 2006, p. 206) and are key for the construction of collective memories and identities. As highly political and contested tools they were traditionally the domain of the nation-state for nurturing patriotism, education and consolidating power (Turner, 2006). However, national collective memory and identity are increasingly complicated due to developments such as globalisation, supranational integration, growing multiculturalism and regionalism (Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Levy & Sznaider, 2002). Similarly, commemorative practices, in a move towards social justice, reconciliation and equality, are increasingly incorporating plural memories and identities, rendering such practices highly complex (Elgenius, 2011; Ryan, 2011).

Many events, including commemorative events, are incorporated into tourism development and destination branding strategies; and permanent sites of commemoration are part of tourist itineraries (Viol et al., 2018; Winter, 2021). Additionally, there is an emerging body of literature on permanent sites of commemoration, such as memorials, museums and battlefield sites as places of leisure (Packer et al., 2019; Winter, 2021). Leisure studies have explored the use of the past, for example in relation to heritage (Liu & Fu, 2019) or re-enactment events (Hunt, 2004). Whilst there is emerging research on commemorative events and their leisure roles for grief (Frew & Forsdike, 2022), event tourism (Viol et al., 2018) or social media activism (Paul, 2021), overall, state-sponsored commemorative events have received limited attention as leisure phenomena. An understanding of how tourism development and political contexts may influence state-sponsored commemorative narratives is lacking. Furthermore, the linkages between events and identity (re)constructions are popular foci of leisure and critical events studies (Merkel, 2015), but commemorative events remain under-researched (Viol et al., 2018). Using semiotics, this paper adds to this pertinent

emerging field by deconstructing the complexities of the commemorative narratives that are communicated at major anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was an event of worldwide significance. Whilst leading to unification of East and West Germany, it is also commonly seen as the end of the Cold War (Drechsel, 2010). Moreover, the peaceful protests in East Germany are often considered a metaphor for the idea that any injustice can be overcome through the power of the people (Detjen, 2011). The anniversary events in 2009 and 2014 had significant event tourism potential (Viol et al., 2018) and in their global appeal presented a turning point in the design of commemorative narratives. The paper makes theoretical contributions to leisure and events studies by outlining how interwoven signs construct multi-layered commemorative narratives. The study demonstrates how strong local and transnational identities are projected at the events for local tourism development and in the context of shifting geopolitical circumstances, providing insight into the fluid nature of commemorative narratives.

Literature review

Collective memory can be understood as a process of constant (re)construction and negotiation of a collective's past, embedded within a social, cultural and political context characterised by a struggle between dominant, marginalised and oppositional groups (French, 2012; Ryan, 2011). As Halbwachs (1925/1992) pointed out in his seminal work, collective memory is important for providing a community with a sense of historical continuity and belonging. Historical continuity contributes to self-understanding for the individual and the group; hence, memory is important for the construction of 'self' but simultaneously also the exclusion of the 'other' (Guibernau, 2007).

The linked concept of identity refers to 'the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 19). Such identities can be constructed in relation to, for example, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or lifestyle. Thus, a sense of a shared memory often constitutes the foundation for the construction of a shared group identity, but an assumed shared group identity also impacts what is remembered and what is forgotten (Gillis, 1994).

(Re)constructions of memories and identities are underpinned by signs, such as emblems and uniforms or, more abstractly, shared customs and rituals which communicate a sense of community (Cohen, 1985). Hence, commemoration provides a platform where participants can be reminded of a communal history and a shared identity can be fostered. These official versions of distinctiveness may take the form of invented traditions, constructed by powerful elites (Hobsbawm, 1983), and the selection of certain characteristics over others reflects the ideology of dominant groups (Jeong & Santos, 2004).

Commemoration hence is by its very nature political and commonly contested, with narratives of memory and identity influenced by organisers' agendas (Gillis, 1994). Forgetting is as relevant as remembering for wounds to heal or governments to stay in power (Connerton, 2008). However, researchers acknowledge the gap between national narratives projected at state-sponsored commemoration and the meanings the audiences attach to such practices (Sumartojo, 2021). Whilst commemoration increasingly engages with plurality, equality and inclusivity (Elgenius, 2011; Ryan, 2011), movements such as Rhodes Must Fall[1] highlight how commemoration continues to act as a platform for the contestation and

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[1] A movement stemming from South Africa that was originally aimed at a statue commemorating colonialist Cecil Rhodes which later developed into a campaign to decolonise education in South Africa and abroad.

negotiation of collective memories and identities (Knudsen & Anderson, 2018; Demaria et al., 2022). Commemoration is reflective of ideological frameworks and even the most laudable of intentions by organisers are not immune to public scrutiny and political interference.

Festivals and events as leisure phenomena have been studied for their role as platforms for constructing and contesting local identity whilst also stimulating the economy (Getz & Page, 2016). Related research has illustrated that commemorative events can be used for tourism development and destination branding purposes (Viol et al., 2018) but this does not mean that their meanings are no longer contested. The construction of desired identities for branding purposes requires manipulation of the place and community so that features which are unsuitable can be excluded, whether these are certain social groups or uncomfortable histories (Atkinson & Laurier, 1998). As such, identity narratives communicated at festivals and events are subject to contestation and negotiation (Merkel, 2015).

National identity has been discussed as the most important type of group identity (Smith, 1991) and commemorative events are often considered for their role in fostering nationalism (McDonald & Méthot, 2006). However, scholars acknowledge that developments such as globalisation, supranational integration, multiculturalism and regionalism have challenged the predominant role of the nation for identity and collective memory (e.g., Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Levy & Sznaider, 2002; Misztal, 2010). Moreover, international tourism has increasingly diversified audiences of commemorative practices to include people that were traditionally considered 'outsiders' (Frost & Laing, 2013). This can impact how sites of commemoration are promoted and operationalised (Winter, 2021). Tour guides may act as intermediaries interpreting the past to a global audience (Pfoser & Keightley, 2019). Considering such changes, some scholars argue that individuals may adopt a transnational

identity based on the emergence of communities beyond the political borders of the nation and the belief in universally applicable rights, values and ideals (Giesen & Eder, 2001). Such a transnational community is also based on an emergent transnational memory, which overcomes national boundaries and strengthens universal solidarity (Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Levy & Sznaider, 2002; Misztal, 2010; Pfoser & Keightley, 2019; Rigney, 2018).

There is limited literature on commemorative events in times of emerging transnational memories and identities. West (2015) suggests that contemporary commemorative events can lead to an increased engagement with national history in a globalising world. Conway (2008) outlines how commemorative events of national significance can be staged with a global outlook by drawing parallels with communities and places facing similar situations around the world. Similarly, Winter (2021) comments that the centenary of the First World War was marked in a more collaborative form based on a shared experience amongst nations. Paul (2021) highlighted the importance of social media activism and diaspora communities for the emergence of a transnationally significant alternative commemoration marking White Armband Day. Despite these acknowledgments that commemorative practices might be changing, there are no in-depth studies of the official commemorative narratives that are constructed at state-sponsored commemorative events and how these reflect shifting cultural and political circumstances. Overall, the various linkages between events, festivals, and identity (re)constructions are well-researched, but commemorative events have been neglected in leisure and events studies. Whilst their contested nature and role for national identity are established, their significance as leisure phenomena remains under-researched. As such, this paper aims to deconstruct the narratives communicated at commemorative events in the context of changing circumstances of the 21st century.

Research context

Despite the momentous nature of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first 15 years after unification of Germany were shaped by a lack of public forms of commemoration. However, in 2006, the Berlin Senate published a strategy on Berlin Wall commemoration that streamlined commemorative efforts in the city. This development was partially due to rising complaints from the tourism industry that there was nothing left of the Wall and controversial private commemorative initiatives (Tölle, 2010). The aims of the strategy were to make the Wall visible again in the public space and to establish appropriate forms of commemoration. As part of the strategy, different locations were used to focus on different stories: Bernauer Straße, for example, illustrates local personal tragedies whereas Brandenburg Gate focuses on national division and unification (Tölle, 2010). The state-sponsored commemoration of the Wall has hence become a managed landscape, and whilst pluralistic in nature, the strategy helped the Senate establish itself as the key interpretative authority while also making places of commemoration more visitor-friendly as places of leisure.

The development culminated in the first major celebrations of the fall of the Wall in 2009 and 2014 for the 20th and 25th anniversaries. The events in both years were organised collaboratively by four institutions: The Berlin Senate, Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e. V. and the Berlin Wall Foundation. The Berlin Senate, and in particular the Cultural Affairs Office, played an important role as it functioned as the key patron of the events. Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH is a state-owned organisation which manages large-scale cultural events and education projects in Berlin on behalf of the Senate and was the main organiser of the events. The Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e. V. is an association administering an archive of the citizens' movement in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Finally, the Berlin Wall Foundation administers the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Straße which is seen by the Senate to be the main memorial site for the Berlin

Wall. The output of this collaborative effort primarily demonstrates a state-sanctioned narrative with local government approval despite inclusion of voices from the citizens' movement.

The 20th anniversary saw the first large-scale celebration in the form of a theme year held throughout the city. Three main activities were included: First, there was an open-air exhibition entitled 'Peaceful Revolution 1989/90'. It was staged on the Alexanderplatz, a public square and major transport hub in former East Berlin and focused on the protests in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Second, there was a hybrid event called 'Perspectives – 20 years of a changing Berlin'. This consisted of exhibitions and activities such as guided tours that showcased the changing nature of Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall at different locations within the city. Finally, the anniversary on 9 November 2009 was celebrated with the 'Festival of Freedom' at Brandenburg Gate. This was the big finale of the theme year and included the fall of dominoes along parts of the route of the Berlin Wall, speeches by international heads of government and various forms of entertainment. The dominoes had been painted in and outside of Germany in an initiative called the 'Domino Campaign'. Approximately two million tourists came to Berlin because of the theme year (Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, 2009).

The 25th anniversary celebrations in 2014 were staged on a smaller scale focused on a key element called the 'Lichtgrenze' ('border of lights') on the weekend of 9 November. This was a 15km-long installation through Berlin's city centre marking the route of the Wall with illuminated white balloons. In the run-up to the event, people were able to adopt balloons. On the evening of 9 November, the 'balloon sponsors' attached personal messages and collectively released balloons. That year saw another open-air exhibition which was staged along the route of the balloons and presented individual anecdotes from times of division. The events in Berlin were accompanied by an online campaign called 'Fall of the Wall 25'

which encouraged people worldwide to share their stories of the Berlin Wall and other literal or metaphorical walls. The 'Lichtgrenze' was visited by two million people over the course of the anniversary weekend (Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, n.d.).

Methodology

Commemorative practices selectively employ signs of memory and identity to project a particular commemorative narrative. The authors employed the semiotic paradigm which may be characterised as 'the study of signs' (Chandler, 2007, p. 2) and human interpretation of their layers of meaning. The semiotic paradigm was valuable in deconstructing the interwoven signs making up the commemorative narratives. The contemporary semiotic paradigm originates from the 1930s work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (Echtner, 1999). Saussure's linguistic approach proposed a dyadic analytical framework. This characterised the sign as the relationship perceived to exist between the signifier (the linguistic sound and/or word) and the signified (the concept being referred to). Peirce in his broader concern added a third element: an interpretant. This joined his presentamen (as signifier) and designatum (as signified), to contemplate the greater, and deeper, interpretative meanings of the sign (Todd, 2022).

Ontologically, semiotics sees social realities as dependent on subjective human interpretation (Chandler, 2007). Human communication of any form relies upon signs in their various verbal, visual, and other, forms (Todd, 2022). Consequently, humans' social realities are constructions, in which signs play a pivotal role (Echtner, 1999). However, there can be multiple contested social realities and their representations in signs are 'sites of struggle' (Chandler, 2007, p. 65). As such, signs are not labels for pre-existing objects or concepts (Chandler, 2007); instead, signs are actively used to construct meaning (Hall, 1997).

Epistemologically, the aim of semiotics is thus not to uncover 'the truth', but rather semiotics aims at understanding how signs are used to construct and communicate meaning (Echtner, 1999). In this sense, the authors did not aim to decode the master narrative as intended by the organisers. The intention here was rather to provide insights into the possible interpretations of signs by members of the audience. The semiotic paradigm is an established method in this context and has been widely used for the analysis of event meanings (Arning, 2013), commemoration (Abousnnouga and Machin, 2014) and identity narratives (Zou et al., 2022).

Methodologically, this research was based on Echtner's (1999) suggested process for semiotic analysis. It involved an analysis of the events themselves, using a combination of personal attendance, recorded television broadcasts, promotional material, and post-event publications (please see Appendix 1). As such the authors also drew on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) approach of multimodal social semiotics which considers the combination of images, photographs, colours and words in the meaning-making process. As part of the analysis, the first author decoded the potential meanings of dominant signs, such as titles of the events, visual signs, spaces and locations employed, and key elements in the event programming. An iterative process of meaning negotiation with the other authors ensued in the form of repeated whole group discussions. Themes were developed from the combinations of signs across the events to penetrate surface meanings and deconstruct the overall commemorative narrative. This involved an analysis of meanings at Barthes' (1957/2000) connotative level, referring to the implicit meanings of signs as decoded by the authors through the semiotic lens.

As with all qualitative research, the semiotic paradigm produces findings that are subjective. The quality of such research can best be ensured by demonstrating how the researchers' backgrounds influenced the analysis (Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001). It is worth mentioning that the lead author of this paper is a German national who was born in a town in

the West of Germany, a few years before the fall of the Wall. Having spent her childhood and teenage years in this town, she has since lived, studied, and worked outside Germany in Europe and Asia. However, she was educated in the German school system and is part of a society for which questions of division and unification were always directly relevant. The remaining authors of this paper are from Northern and Southern Europe and have also indirectly experienced the Berlin Wall's implications for division and unity in Europe.

Deconstructing the commemorative narrative

The following paragraphs present the findings from the analysis of the anniversary events of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This section discusses the key themes developed from combinations of signs and their implicit meanings as interpreted by the authors through the semiotic lens. The findings focus first on collective memory and identity narratives prior to discussing the deconstructed commemorative narrative in its entirety. The events communicated four major memory narratives about the historical events from 1989, which 'reverberated' as layered identity narratives at the local, national, and transnational level. The following analysis shows that these multi-layered memory and identity narratives coexist in interwoven signs without being mutually exclusive.

Memory narratives

Firstly, at both anniversaries, Berlin is placed at the centre of the historical events of 1989. One of the signs that communicates this message is the chosen space of the main celebration in 2009, i.e., Brandenburg Gate. From a semiotic perspective, the Gate can be seen as a synecdoche for the city of Berlin, a rhetorical trope where the whole is referred to by a part of that whole (Chandler, 2007). Simultaneously, given its association with a range of important historical events such as the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Prussia, the wars against Napoleon's Empire, the seizure of power by the Nazis and, of course, German division, the

Gate works as a symbol for Berlin's status as a city of historical importance. Furthermore, with the Brandenburg Gate widely known around the world, it also fulfilled a place branding function. The imagery of the festival (such as Figure 1) will have been seen around the world and may be linked to Berlin's prevailing role in international collective memory even though East German cities like Leipzig, Plauen and Dresden were also central to the Peaceful Revolution (Kaiser, 2013).

[Figure 1 near here]

Secondly, the commemorative narrative makes a statement about the role of the citizens' movement in the GDR, namely that a Peaceful Revolution took place and that this was a prerequisite for the fall of the Wall. This is particularly communicated in 2009 through the inclusion of the exhibition 'Peaceful Revolution 1989/90' (Figure 2). The focus of this exhibition was on the process of self-liberation from a suppressive government which in the end led to German unification. With the choice of title, the organisers are making a statement about the status of the citizens' movement. From a semiotic lens, the paradigmatic structures, i.e., the creation of meaning through selection (Echtner, 1999), are of relevance. The term Peaceful Revolution has been widely discussed in the past (Damm & Thompson, 2009). Simon (2014) argues that East Germans experienced a revolution whereas West Germans merely experienced a 'Wende' ('turning point'), and this latter term prevailed due to West German dominance. Accordingly, the open-air exhibition in 2009 clearly presented East German memory in this matter. Indeed, Eckert (2009) claims that the events of 2009 established the term Peaceful Revolution. This focus on the citizens' movement can be traced back to the involvement of the Robert-Havemann-Gesellschaft e. V.

[Figure 2 near here]

The role of the public for overcoming injustice was also emphasised in 2014. In the evening of 9 November 2014, the balloons were released one after the other by their sponsors (Figure 3). The release of the balloons is an icon and an index of the fall of the Wall. In Pierce's typology of signs, an icon is a sign which resembles the object, whereas an index is a sign that has a causal relation to the object (Echtner, 1999). As in 1989, the people are essential in the process of the border opening. The scheme for adopting balloons thus functions as an index of citizens' participation and communal action. At the same time, it can be perceived as a symbol for the power of the people which can help overcome walls and borders, communicating a universal message of hope and optimism. Although an emphasis on the revolutionary movement in both anniversary years can be interpreted as a stronger emergence of an East German memory, a discussion of the movement in the context of German unification and West German democratic tradition is still evidence of West German dominance in collective memory (Kaiser, 2013). The portrayal of overcoming an impenetrable Wall and a suppressive government through collective action, nevertheless, allows the universal moral message to emerge – the idea that if the Berlin Wall can fall, then any injustice can be overcome (Detjen, 2011), thus making the narrative particularly appealing worldwide.

[Figure 3 near here]

The commemorative events further make a statement about the significant role of the fall of the Wall for a united Europe and the wider Western world. Even though the fall of the Wall united Germany, this is not at the focus of the celebrations. Instead, the narrative focuses on how the fall of the Wall brought about positive change for Europe and beyond, for example, by subsequently enabling the expansion of the European Union (EU). This message is communicated at the 'Festival of Freedom' in 2009 through the presence of most heads of the EU member states (Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH, 2009). This anniversary was preceded

by the Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007, hence the event helped redefine the previous communist opponents as members of a European community. The interpretation of the fall of the Wall as a peaceful and unifying turning point, however, is not without contradictions (Siebold, 2014). This narrative excludes the consideration of new impenetrable borders that formed with the help of Western countries after 1989 such as the external borders of the European Union that keep out the 'other' whilst enhancing mobility inside the Schengen Area for the 'self' (Siebold, 2014).

Finally, the narrative entails a story about the fall of the Wall as the event which led to freedom, democracy, and human rights. This is communicated, for example, with the 'Festival of Freedom' in 2009. As a synecdoche, the title of this event signifies the freedoms gained by living in a Western society – free movement, free speech, free elections, free markets, and similar. Celebratory elements such as the musical performances and the fireworks underpin this message (Figure 1). The 'Perspectives' event in 2009 communicated a similar message. Its title creates a paradigmatic opposite, in that it implies that prior to 1989 the city was of a different nature and that the fall of the Wall gave the city the freedom to prosper. In 2014, the celebratory communal release of the balloons also signifies the celebration of the start of an improved life. Prior to the end of the Cold War, citizens in the GDR were thus deprived of certain rights and freedoms. During this time, the Berlin Wall functioned as a symbol of this oppression and its destruction 'freed' the East German citizens. In this way, the narrative legitimises German unification under West German terms as well as Western ideological frameworks more generally.

Identity narratives

The events construct identity narratives in three layers at the local, national, and transnational level. Berlin is portrayed through the events both as a city of historical importance and a city

of change. The events anchor Berlin as the location of key historical events in international

collective memory which evokes an identity involving grandeur and status. However, the

focus is not on Berlin's history and status as a capital but on its contribution to worldwide

change. Tölle (2010) argues that a focus on Berlin's historic status is avoided in local identity

construction due to associations with the Nazi past and instead, Berlin is portrayed 'as a city

making history' (p. 354). Thus, the notion of change is already present in Berlin's historically

grounded identity. On the other hand, Berlin is showcased as presently still changing and

progressing towards being a modern metropolis. This is most notable in the 'Perspectives'

event in 2009, where both locals and non-locals are invited by a red floating arrow to explore

the changing cityscape of Berlin as attractions (Figure 4).

[Figure 4 near here]

A further important element of this event was a red staircase which was a central

point of information (Figure 5). On the inside, visitors were informed about the various

locations that formed a part of this event. The title of the event signifies that unification

triggered a change process which is still ongoing; the city is not in its final shape. People can

come and witness this process in a few select representative locations. They are invited

through the oversized floating arrow and the staircase. The arrow tells the viewer which

places in Berlin to investigate and thus also which not to. The staircase, with no higher level

to be reached except a very small platform, was an invitation for the people to gaze upon the

cityscape – literally from a different perspective.

[Figure 5 near here]

In the same vein, the choice of locations (Table 1) also portrays Berlin as a modern

and progressive metropolis in the centre of Europe. From a semiotic perspective, the

syntagmatic structures, the creation of meaning through combination (Echtner, 1999), are of

relevance. The city is depicted as a constantly evolving place, but this evolution happens for the benefit of residents, businesses, education, and research. Simultaneously, Berlin is no longer a place on the margins of Europe but located in its very centre where the processes of growing together have been successfully taking place. In line with the title of the event and the theme of 'change', all locations are places that either did not exist at all in 1989/90 or have undergone significant changes since unification. Many of these, naturally, are used to showcase how Berlin has changed for the better since unification and how it is now a modern metropolis with infrastructure one would find in any major European city.

[Table 1 near here]

The notion of change that is used to create a local identity connects Berlin's recent past with its present and future: The fall of the Berlin Wall had brought about international political change as well as local urban change and the changing cityscape is evidence of a city growing together and becoming a metropolis. The idea of branding Berlin as a place of change, however, is not new, as already throughout the 1990s large-scale construction sites such as Potsdamer Platz were staged as attractions with visitor information centres and viewing platforms (Colomb, 2012). The commemorative narrative thus aligns with wider city branding strategies and functions as a further resource for branding Berlin, while also constructing a positive, confident identity. This is particularly relevant given the diverse makeup of the population that the narrative attempts to unite (Lisiak, 2009).

The national identity communicated at the events is subtle and primarily a reaffirmation of the status quo. It is communicated in a variety of ways in both anniversary years. It can be seen in the choice of locations of the 'Perspectives' event in 2009, which reaffirm that Western capitalism and globalisation were the solutions for the inferior conditions of life in the GDR. For example, Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, Potsdamer Platz and

Mediaspree are locations with new or improved leisure facilities. Through the semiotic paradigm, these improved facilities can be seen as a synecdoche of improved living conditions in Germany since unification. Celebratory elements such as the 'Festival of Freedom' in 2009 or the balloon release in 2014 underpin the message of unification under West German terms as the best possible outcome of the fall of the Wall. Through the focus on East German failures and West German successes, unification under West German terms is legitimised (Eedy, 2010). Ludwig (2011) furthermore remarks how a narrative of overcoming the suppressive GDR government helps to emphasise the West German success story and construct a national identity with the ideal of freedom at its core and this narrative is evident in the commemorative events.

A particularly strong, overarching identity narrative is based on the construction of a transnational community of shared values. In this context, the Western world is presented as a champion of freedom, justice, democracy, and human rights. For example, at the 'Festival of Freedom' in 2009, the nations represented through foreign dignitaries are portrayed as advocates of these values and ideals. This transnational identity, however, is fluid and reflective of contemporary geopolitical priorities. While the events in 2009 emphasised the European Union as a particularly strong community, in 2014 this emphasis was weaker. This is to be seen in the context of the post-2009 changes including the conflict in Ukraine on European grounds in 2014, a rise of nationalist parties in the 2014 European Parliament elections as well as an aggravating refugee crisis. Nevertheless, the events in 2014 still constructed a transnational identity, but this focused on a more abstract community of shared values. These shared values were communicated, for example, through the social media campaign 'Fall of the Wall 25'. This campaign signifies the international applicability of the values and ideals connected with the citizens' movement and the fall of the Wall and the idea that the significance of the historical events goes beyond the local or the national.

In both years, this transnational identity is not only communicated through the presence of foreign dignitaries but also through the participatory approach which was not limited to a local or national audience, but encouraged people worldwide to participate and contribute, for example, by painting a domino in 2009 or sharing messages through the online campaign in 2014. Participation at commemorative events can foster cohesion, solidarity, and overall identity constructions (Kaiser, 2013) and participation is not limited by nationality. This international participatory approach contributed to the projection of a transnational community that transcends borders.

Transnational collective memory and a multi-layered identity narrative

The commemorative narrative is remarkable for a variety of reasons. First, the literature on commemoration would suggest that historical events lend themselves to an interpretation of national significance and a celebration of the birth of a nation (e.g., Frost, 2012; Hall et al., 2010). Rather than emphasising the fall of the Wall as the moment that enabled a united Germany, the memory narrative extends beyond national borders and, particularly in 2009, celebrates the birth of a united Western world. This interpretation of the historical event as communicated through the memory narratives 'reverberates' as identity in multiple layers at the local, national and transnational level, illustrated in Figure 6.

[Figure 6 near here]

The interpretation of the historical events being of international significance, yet rooted in Berlin, allows for strong local and transnational identity narratives. Authors such as Frost and Laing (2013), Gillis (1994) or McDonald and Méthot (2006) consider commemoration of political events primarily within the national realm. Here, this national dimension appears to be less relevant. Therefore, ideas about transnational solidarity based on a transnational collective memory as suggested by Assmann and Conrad (2010), Levy and

Sznaider (2002) and Misztal (2010) are relevant for contemporary state-sponsored commemoration. The emphasis and projection of shared values of human rights, freedom and democracy communicate this sense of community, solidarity, and cohesion. Solidarity is expressed between citizens of the 'free' Western world and citizens around the globe struggling for justice and human rights. Naturally, the transnational sense of community is not all-inclusive. It excludes those who do not share its values and ideals, those who do not support Western democratic and capitalist systems and those who are not in the process of transitioning to such systems. While not restricted to national boundaries, such an identity still constructs 'self' and 'other'. However, it can be argued that the transnational identity is more fluid as can be seen in the changes in its interpretation and focus in the course of five years. This identity is particularly reflective of ideological frameworks and geopolitical priorities of the time.

Furthermore, there is a strong local identity narrative which presents the city of Berlin as a city of change, a narrative which consolidates the role of the Wall for local identity construction and is not surprising given the involvement of the Berlin Senate and other local actors. Tölle (2010) argues that after 2004 the meaning of the Wall was spun to represent a 'happy ending' and in this way the Wall became a useful branding resource for the city of Berlin. The findings from this study suggest that these commemorative events were used for destination branding purposes, a notion that is supported by findings presented by Viol et al. (2018) which highlighted the event tourism use of the respective commemorative events. The event tourism and branding potential of these events can thus have a significant impact on the commemorative narratives as organisers attempt to communicate local branding messages to global audiences.

The national identity dimension is not the most dominant. The events are in line with common conceptions of German identity, which are not based on strong feelings of

nationalism but on strong identification with Western values and the nation's membership in a community of nations (McKay, 2002). Nevertheless, the realisation that a positive event took place on German soil indeed allows for a positive self-understanding (Kaiser, 2013). However, this does not happen at the expense of the nation's membership in the transnational community. In this case, national and transnational identity are complementary, further supporting the idea that multiple collective identities can exist simultaneously (Smith, 1991).

Conclusion

This paper deconstructed the commemorative narratives communicated at key anniversary events celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall. Employing the semiotic paradigm, the research illustrated how interwoven signs construct multi-layered commemorative narratives. By interpreting the historical event to be rooted in Berlin but of global significance, strong local and transnational narratives are constructed, whilst the national dimension remains subtle. The study outlines how such multi-layered narratives can coexist without causing friction. In doing so, this research furthers the understanding of commemorative events, collective memory and identity and makes several major theoretical contributions to the social sciences field of memory studies and its emerging applications within leisure and events studies.

This research demonstrates how state-sponsored commemorative events can be used to communicate a sense of a transnational community based on shared values. There is an extant body of literature on transnational memories and identities (e.g., Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Levy & Sznaider, 2002; Misztal, 2010) and a growing discourse on memory studies in leisure and tourism (e.g. Packer et al., 2019; Pfoser & Keightley, 2019; Winter, 2021). There are further numerous studies that consider the semiotics of tourism, events, and the meanings associated with these, and other spaces of leisure (Todd, 2022) and leisure studies have engaged with the past in the context of heritage or re-enactment events (Hunt, 2004; Liu &

Fu, 2019). However, there is little theoretical development of how transnational memories and identities are constructed through interwoven signs employed in the specific context of state-sponsored commemorative events. As this study illustrates, the events communicated a narrative of triumph of internationally appealing ideals and values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights. In doing so, the events projected a transnational sense of community beyond national boundaries which is inclusive of those who support the Western ideological frameworks promoted through the events thus highlighting the complexity and richness of contemporary commemoration. In this sense, the paper contributes to leisure studies by outlining how commemorative events, an under-researched event type, construct multiple group identities. As such, the findings can be of value to other destinations by showcasing how the past can be commemorated without fostering nationalism. Given the move towards social justice, reconciliation and equality (Elgenius, 2011; Ryan, 2011) and the continued contestation and negotiation of collective memories and identities (Knudsen & Anderson, 2018; Demaria et al., 2022) in commemorative practices, the study evidences that it is possible to communicate transnational and universal values that unite beyond the political boundaries of the nation.

Furthermore, the paper shows that commemorative events are not just used for national political reasons but can be designed for broader leisure purposes. So far, studies of commemoration have indeed suffered from a 'territorial trap' (Conway, 2008, p. 189, referring to Brenner, 1999), in which the overwhelming focus on the political context of the nation leads scholars to research commemoration predominantly in relation to national collective memory and national identity. In this context, the study also shows that contemporary commemorative events can be used for local branding efforts by constructing strong local identity narratives. Here, the study suggests that branding priorities as part of broader tourism development strategies have an impact on the commemorative narrative

(Viol et al., 2018), showcasing that the complexity of contemporary commemorative narratives has been commonly overlooked in existing research.

The study evidences that commemorative events can potentially fulfil multiple purposes and cater to a wide range of diverse audiences, leading to multi-layered narratives. Whilst such events may be used for local tourism development purposes, this does not mean they are no longer political tools. In fact, the research showed how narratives can be fluid and influenced by shifting political contexts. In this sense, the event in 2009 supported particular geopolitical agendas and the re-invention of European identity following the Eastern expansion of the EU in 2004 and 2007 to eliminate the divisions between Eastern and Western Europeans and to unify them on the "culturally secure ground" of being European (Tekiner, 2020). It is noteworthy that the European Parliament organised a formal sitting to mark the anniversary occasion in 2009 but not in 2014 (Sierp, 2017), by which time the aftermath of the 2012 Eurozone crisis had led to a rise in Euroscepticism across member states (Kutter, 2020). This change in political climate led to the projection of a more abstract transnational identity in the 2014 commemoration events. The focus on shared values of democracy, freedom, and human rights further helped to show solidarity in relation to issues such as the Syrian refugee and Crimean crises of the time.

Finally, the paper also makes an applied contribution by illustrating that commemorative events can be designed as leisure experiences for an international audience. To reach more than a local or national audience, the commemoration might use a participatory approach and focus on the communication of the international outcomes of the historical event and subsequent internationally appealing ideals and values. As this study shows, this can be done using widely understood symbols that communicate such ideals and values that are not exclusively of national relevance. These symbols, such as the balloon or the domino, are simple for the audience to decode in the context of the events while at the

same time offering a participatory and appealing aesthetic element that adds to the 'spectacle' of the occasion. The case of Berlin shows that contemporary commemorative narratives can represent the past in ways that current audiences can identify and connect to. Focusing on values such as freedom and democracy can help bring diverse audiences together without giving rise to nationalistic feelings that divide communities. The study also provides event managers with further insight into how design choices may lead to a particular commemorative narrative and how this narrative, through the lens of semiotics, may be deconstructed and interpreted by different audiences. An understanding of this process is beneficial for a more reflective and inclusive approach to the design of such commemorative events.

By its nature, semiotics is a human-centred and interpretive approach to understanding communicated signs. In this context, the subjectivity of semiotics is considered a strength of this approach. Nevertheless, the inherent subjectivity of this research is a dichotomy that may be criticised by some readers. In line with its ontological and epistemological underpinnings, the semiotic analysis of the narrative is reflective of the authors' perspectives. It would certainly be of interest to research further interpretations of such narratives and future research may include a wider range of perspectives by giving voice to members of the audience representing different identities and backgrounds or using different methods. Further research should also conduct similar analyses of other events as the Berlin Wall anniversaries were state-sanctioned and took place in a particular set of circumstances. As this study highlights, commemorative narratives are fluid and reflect wider political, cultural and social circumstances. The Western world has since seen a further acceleration of the refugee crisis in Europe and Germany in 2015, the election of Donald Trump as US President and the vote for Brexit in the UK in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the war in Ukraine in 2022. At the same time, social and political movements

such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have increasingly shed light on representations of marginalised communities. Such contextual factors will have an impact on contemporary commemorative narratives. It would therefore be of interest to conduct further semiotic analyses of subsequent commemorative events and explore what types of multi-layered commemorative narratives they construct.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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